

Macquarie University

Michelle Hamadache

**Between autobiography and intimacy: an English monolingual's foray into
Algeria**

Abstract:

Algeria has traditionally been the territory of Arabic and Francophone studies. The vast majority of texts about Algeria have been written in French or Arabic, only some of which have been translated into English. This reflects the history of its two most consequential, although radically different, colonizations, that of the Arabs in 680 AD and that of the French, 1830- 1962. On what grounds, if any, is it possible for Algeria, its history, its literature and its theorists to enter into the field of English literature?

In this paper I argue that the act of producing an autobiographical memoir as part of a Creative PhD in a department of English provides a unique opportunity for 'Algeria' to enter into English studies. Through a discussion of Jacques Derrida's proposition in *Monolingualism of the Other; Prosthesis of Origin* that we only ever speak one language, we never speak only one language, I argue that the languages of intimacy and autobiography enable even an English monolingual to write an Algeria in English, into English.

Biographical note:

Michelle Hamadache is in her final year of a Creative PhD in English at Macquarie University where she has completed a creative piece entitled *Algiers* and is currently working on her critical discourse. The first two chapters of *Algiers* were published in *Island 106*. 'Armories of Love', a piece adapted from *Algiers*, was published in *Kunapipi* Volume XXVIII Number 2, journal of postcolonial writing. Michelle also presented a paper from her critical discourse at the Macquarie-Newcastle Humanities Postgraduate Research Symposium, 2007. Short stories *Ciro* and *The Chrysalis* were published in the 13th UTS Anthology, *Tumbling Through Ways*, 1997.

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Twenty years ago on New Year's Eve, I met my Algerian husband, Amine, on the steps of Saint Lorenzo's Cathedral, Perugia, Italy. By February we had moved in together and we lived in Italy for some years before coming to Australia. In 2002 I travelled to Algiers with our first child and spent six weeks in a two bed roomed apartment with my husband's mother and his seven siblings in the height of an Algerian summer. Those are the bones, so to speak, of what forms the creative component, entitled *Algiers*, of my PhD thesis.

From the outset the theoretical component of my thesis was to be about Algeria. I wanted to better understand the historical, political and economic conditions that led my husband, and many others of his generation, to leave newly independent Algeria. But the further I progressed with my research, the more I was overcome by a growing sense of uncertainty. Which trajectory of Algeria's history to follow? How deep into the past to go? Whose version of history was I relating, and most of all what were my particular credentials for writing Algeria into English Academia?

My French is poor and working within the timeframe of a PhD candidature and primary carer to three small children, 'mastering' French to a degree where I could access the many seminal texts on Algeria that have yet to be translated into English, was simply not an option for me. Arabic, with its 'other' alphabet was never even a serious consideration, particularly in the face of my husband's horror at my attempts to speak Algerian Arabic dialect, his first language. Confronted by a multitude of multilingual theorists, the growth of francophone studies in universities across the world, and 'real' Algerians, a thesis on Algeria whose research was based largely on English translations seemed increasingly untenable.

Yet the creative body of my emerging manuscript testified to an original, though clearly not straightforward, relationship to the historical reality of an intimacy between an Algerian and an Australian that refused to be silenced by my linguistic shortcomings. It was the existence of this creative body coupled with Jacques Derrida's text *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin* that enabled me to work through many of the linguistic prohibitions I felt about writing Algeria into English. *Monolingualism of the Other* is particularly pertinent to this discussion because it forms part of Derrida's own autobiographical turn in the 1990's and is embedded with Derrida's past in Algeria. It is also important to note that in *Monolingualism of the Other* theory and autobiography are fused, and through this Derrida demonstrates, or invents, the way his personal experience of growing up in French colonial Algeria actively informed the course of his theoretical writings.

Language

In order to avoid conflation between the different ways in which the word 'language' can be used, I will begin by drawing on a distinction that Derrida outlines in *Of Hospitality*. Derrida discusses both a broad and narrow sense of language, and identifies a difference and an adhesion, a stricture between the two understandings. According to Derrida, language in the broad sense can be understood as 'the ensemble of culture...the values, the norms, the meanings that inhabit the language' (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000:133). In the narrow sense, language can be understood as a

‘discursive idiom that is not coextensive with citizenship’(Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000:133), and here Derrida gives the example of the English language as it is spoken by both English and American people, although the 'Australian' English that I speak is more relevant in this context.

To add to this, in *Monolingualism of the Other* Derrida makes two further seemingly irreconcilable assertions about language. Firstly, that we only ever speak one language and secondly that we never speak only one language. According to Derrida, one of the reasons we never speak one language is because language is always made up of ‘radical grafting...deformations, transformations [and] expropriations’(Derrida 1998:65). It is only through political, cultural and historical constructions that there arises a 'one' of language, in a narrow or broad sense. Edouard Glissant, in *Poetics of Relation*, is scathing about notions of language that are reductive or limiting, going so far as to describe ‘monolingual intent as totalitarian’. According to Glissant what prevents ‘linguistic sparkle and fluid equilibrium’ of language, is the paralyzing force of monolingual prejudice, “my language my root””(Glissant 1997:19,98)

The particular Algerian Arabic dialect that my husband speaks is more widely spoken in Algeria than any other language. It is intensely hybridized, fused with French, Arabic, Spanish, and the Tamazight languages of Algeria's original inhabitants. It varies from region to region and remains comprehensible only as far as Tunisia and Morocco. It is also unwritten and, along with French and the Tamazight languages, was subject to a fierce state campaign following Algerian independence that sought to eradicate Algeria's linguistic diversity and replace it with one language, Modern Arabic. Despite aggressive policies across schools, universities, ministries and media to enforce the use of Modern Arabic, the spoken Algerian dialect remains a vibrant language that continues to 'sparkle with fluid equilibrium' in spite of the monolingual totalitarianism of its political environment. Even though I do not speak Algerian, I fell in love with it when I first heard it spoken by my husband in the streets of Perugia.

Writing Algeria into English

After twenty years with my husband I know some one hundred words of dialect. Depending on the subject of the conversation I can understand from eighty percent to nothing. Each and every one of the words I know is inscribed in my mind and body with the place and the time that I learned it. The word 'fum' or mouth, for instance, I learned from Amine one winter's evening beneath Perugia's Etruscan Arch. 'Malabelish' which means 'I don't know' but rolls of the tongue so much better, instantly brings to mind the first night I had dinner with Ridah, Rachid and Karim, so much so that I hear their voices and see their faces. 'Inshaallah', god willing, is the word used to guide one safely and humbly into the future, whether that be the future of 'I'll make couscous for lunch 'inshallah', or 'inshallah' we will return to Algeria this year.

In a very concrete way the English of my creative thesis *Algiers* is inflected with Algeria in both Derrida's narrow and broad sense of language. A practical concern in writing my autobiographical memoir was to what extent I could incorporate words from Algerian dialect into my writing. I am sure Bill Ashcroft was not thinking of an

Australian Algerian English when he discusses writing techniques such as 'glossing', - the translating of 'foreign words' in texts, or the opposite, the technique of leaving foreign words untranslated so the reader has to work through context and intention to find a meaning. Yet those were precisely the choices I faced. How far could I stretch the English language in order to colour it with my beloved hard-learned words of Algeroua before it became alienating to an English reader? Could an English reader learn an Algerian word through my memoir? Would they want to? Or, how to capture the pigeon French Algerian mélange I communicated in with my husband's family, without making reading tedious? How to bring Algeria to English so that its language in the narrow sense, reverberated with the ensemble of culture, meanings and values in the broad sense of language?

There is a fusing of perspectives that comes with intimacy between people over time. Although I am not religious, my husband is a practicing Muslim and that means I am not outside of Islam. In the English language, post September 11, 'Islam' connotes terrorism and women in burqas. That is not the Islam that I know and my autobiographical memoir is framed by a sense of urgency to write an alternative narrative about people who are Muslims with an emphasis on interrelations rather than othering. In real terms, I find my husband's addiction to late night soccer far more troubling than the fact that he prays facing Mecca, does Ramadan and only eats Halal meat.

That is not to trivialize the very real and brutal violence in Algeria. The theoretical component of my thesis has added a depth to my understanding of the complexity of Algeria's history that I would never have reached without the rigorous research demands of a PhD, and this in turn shaped my creative thesis. The nature of Algeria's violence today is not separate from the colonial practices of France. France's 'civilizing mission' in Algeria resulted in a 93% rate of illiteracy amongst Algerians. Those Algerians who were educated were excluded from many occupations and lacked real employment opportunities. Nor were they accorded adequate political representation. French colonial policies also privileged corruption by giving limited power to a very few Algerians, encouraged the existing division between Tamazight peoples and Arabs, and upon the outbreak of war, France actively massacred many educated Algerians, with a view to extinguishing the revolution. This last tactic of destroying the moderate voices of Algerian independence, combined with France's well documented and prolific use of wrongful imprisonment, torture and execution, contributed to the creation of a climate of extreme violence in Algeria that has not reached an end yet.

It is the very real ongoing imperialism of the world today that enables those sorts of complexities to disappear from configurations of Algeria and Algerians in the English language. There is no doubt that my personal connection to Amine shaped the way I read 'Algerian history' and structured my research and creative work. The degree to which my personal bias shapes the language of my critical and creative writing, although not transparent, is given a unique energy within a creative PhD where autobiography and theory are placed side by side. It becomes part of the reader's responsibility to decide what the boundaries of my language are; to what extent my language is Algerian, Australian, personal, objective, critical or creative.

Translation

My PhD thesis can be seen to rely upon translation in a number of ways. As a self-confessed English monolingual, without the copious use of translations, from Derrida to Mouloud Feraoun, my Algeria in English would have been very thin indeed. On a broader level, because many of the important theoretical movements that have shaped English studies have been fuelled by the translated work of theorists such as Barthes and Foucault, the figure of translation was always already active in my English. To take this consideration one step further, for Abdulla Al-Dabbagh translation points to the unity of 'human culture' in the multiplicity of its languages and the 'capacity of Western culture to absorb and appropriate, through translation, works from other cultures'.(Al-Dabbagh 2010: 36-7)

For Walter Benjamin in the 'Task of the Translator, translation unleashes every language's ability to be made foreign to its own speakers.(Benjamin 1999:81) Benjamin posits the likelihood that languages, in a state of flux between what is intended and differing modes of intention, will continue to grow throughout time and that this growth occurs in part through translation, through contiguity with other languages. He writes:

If, however, these languages continue to grow in this manner until the end of their time, it is translation which catches fire on the eternal life of the works and the perpetual renewal of language. Translation keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test: How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation, how close can it be brought by the knowledge of this remoteness?(Benjamin 1999:75)

Imagine a spate of Algerian films, novels and memoirs that meant the Algerian word 'entic', which roughly translated means 'cool', became as widely understood amongst English speakers as the words 'hajeb' or 'fatwa'. Or if the word 'Muslim' began to resonate in English with something more than terrorism and misogyny? Bill Ashcroft speaks of postcolonial writers playing with the horizons of intention and meaning that hybridize and de-centre dominant languages. 'Language therefore can be made to change, to be used in different ways of talking about the world and in a metaphorical sense, to lead to changing the world itself.'(Ashcroft 2009:4)

In a passage that has been oft quoted, from de Man to Bhabha, Benjamin describes the task of translation as that of making both the language of the original and the language of the translation 'recognizable as the broken part of a greater language, just as fragments are the broken part of a vessel.'(Jacobs 1975:762) In the course of Benjamin's discussion, a difference arises between the language of an original that relates more directly to the world, and the language of translation, history and philosophy that relate more closely to textual expressions of life. Carol Jacobs in 'The Monstrosity of Translation' remarks that Benjamin's essay can be read as a metaphor for criticism.(Jacobs 1975:764) In this sense, a creative PhD thesis built out of two pieces of language standing side by side, one in the language of poetics, the world, and experience, and the other in the language of criticism, theory and history, can be seen to be translating each other. Fragments that follow one another, not identical and definitely not adding up to a whole, but nonetheless contributing to the growth of language.

Autobiography

Earlier I considered some of the ways Derrida defended his proposition that we ‘never speak one language.’ Now I will discuss the grounds Derrida gives for saying the opposite and how this contributes to an argument that intimacy and autobiography can provide the grounds for Algeria to enter into English academia.

In an interview in *Points* Derrida says the following,

You dream, it’s unavoidable, about the invention of a language or of a song that would be yours, not the attributes of a “self,”...I’m not talking about a style but an intersection of singularities, habitat, voices, graphism, what moves with you and what your body never leaves. In my memory, what I write resembles a dotted-line drawing that would be circling around a book to be written in what I call for myself the “old new language,” the most archaic and the most novel, therefore unheard-of, unreadable at present ... (Derrida & Weber 1995:119)

The language that Derrida longs to invent, *his* language, the ‘old-new’ language would express the sum of his singularities¹ but also ‘culture, languages, families. Algeria first of all...’. Derrida describes his disorder of identity as arising from the desire to ‘invent a language different enough to disallow its own *reappropriation* with the norms, the body, and the law of the given language’ (Derrida 1998:66) and the impossibility of this language which would then be an incomprehensible, unreadable, untranslatable event. We all imprint something of our individuality into whatever language or languages we speak, make something of an idiom of them all, and this is one of the grounds that Derrida uses for saying we all speak only one language. Yet the absolute hybridity of language, its origin and destiny in and for the other, its promise and its terror, which roughly translated would be, the hope of understanding and potential for misunderstanding, means that we never speak One language. Or in the words of Jean Luc Nancy, ‘A pure idiolect would be idiotic, utterly deprived of relations and, therefore, of identity. A pure culture, a pure property, would be idiotic.’ (Nancy 2000:154)

In *Ear of the Other*, Derrida describes a borderline between the self and the work as a dynamis, a dynamis because it is mobile, potent, neither inside nor outside, and definitely not a thin line between the discrete enclosures of the life of the author and their philosophemes. (Derrida 1988:5) In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida writes of the way France's colonial policies of mastery and racism in Algeria caused him to feel that the French language was not his and how his theory, from his learning of Western metaphysics, to his deconstructing of Western metaphysics proceeded from this sense of alienation². Yet the writings of a youthful Derrida do not quite reflect that position. In an early essay and letter he wrote of the benefits of French colonialism in Algeria and defended France's education policy³. This is not to doubt the veracity of Derrida's claim, only to allude towards that shifting borderline between self and work that language opens up.

I would argue that the most potent aspect of a creative PhD is the becoming mobile of the borderline between the creative and the theoretical. My thesis as a whole forms part of the dotted outline, to borrow from Derrida, circling around my own life. How much of my theoretical writing is objective if I love an Algerian? Does my

autobiographical memoir *Algiers* begin with the meeting of my husband in 1992 or did the love affair begin with my reading of Camus in the 1980's? Or in other words, did I look at my husband differently because I 'knew' Algeria through *The Outsider* and *The Plague*? Or to follow a different trajectory, is a woman with a predisposition for Derrida writing Algeria or translating it to suit her interests? This is the point where, to paraphrase Derrida, you want me to begin with 'I met my husband on the steps of Saint Lorenzo's Cathedral', but I can't, you will have to help me.⁴

Even had I never learnt a word of dialect or French, nor married an Algerian, and never travelled to Algiers, I would argue that it is language itself that invites the possibility of monolinguals of any language to write on any language. Unlike the myths of nationhood and national languages that incite wars over the smallest shift in boundary and view foreign bodies as contamination or breaches in security, either of *the* language or of *the* nation, language draws together diverse eras, nationalities, genealogies and genders. Language is a ground of possibility that brings together poetry, histories, 'foreign languages' and translations, on the basis of such notions as Algeria, Algeria in language. A ground that enables an English monolingual to write herself into the ever expanding language that is never quite just English, yet which retains, at this moment, the spectre of a world where 'languages are sinking each day by the hundreds' (Derrida 1998:30).

Endnotes

1. (Derrida 1998:58) 'This a priori universal truth of an essential alienation in language...A setting called historical and singular, one which appears idiomatic, which determines and phenomenizes it by bringing it back to itself.'
2. (Derrida 1998:71-3) 'A Judeo-Franco-Maghrebian genealogy does not clarify everything, far from it. But could I explain anything without it, ever?'
3. (Baring) See Edward Baring's discussion of Derrida's letter to Pierre Nora in defence of French liberals and his essay written in his third year at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand.
4. 'Ah, you want me to say things like "I-was-born-in El Biar- on-the-outskirts-of-Algiers...Is that really necessary? I can't do it. You will have to help me..." (Derrida & Weber 1995:119-20)

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